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WHAT IS A PARTY?

FROM the beginning political development has depended on party. "The castes of the ancient world are the fossilized remains" of parties once active in a world still more ancient. The political interest of early Hebrew history centers in the struggle of an intensely national party, which sought to exclude foreign influences altogether, with a party which looked to Egypt and to the more civilized states of western Asia for ideas and support. And so it is always and everywhere; party is the manifestation of political life, and the indispensable means of its growth. In recent times, moreover, every advanced people has come to look to party—to an extent already great, and everywhere increasing—for government. But in order that political development may be sufficiently rapid and at the same time rightly proportioned and healthful, and that party government may be good government, it is necessary that the people, as well as the philosopher and the student, should have just ideas concerning this agent whose conduct so profoundly influences their welfare.

Without attempting to include every point that may properly enter into a complete definition, I offer, in reply to the question, What is a party? the following as a summary of its most important characteristics: A party is a durable organization which, in its simplest form, consists of a single group of citizens united by common principles, but, in its more complex forms, of two or more such groups held together by the weaker bond of a common policy; and which, contrary to the view usually held, has for its immediate end the advancement of the interests and the realization of the ideals, not of the people as a whole, but of the particular group or groups which it represents.

The definition rests upon, and in part gives expression to, a theory of party which deviates widely from those now current. Let us examine each of its propositions.

I. *Organization.*

Organization is the process which, for the purpose of effective work, converts many into one. In the case of party it is the birth-process ; for, however large the number of those who think and feel alike may be, they cannot, until organized, do anything noteworthy in support of their common interests. There is, however, no particular form nor any definable amount of organization which is always requisite to the formation of a party. The form varies as greatly as does that of government ; and the amount which will suffice under one set of conditions may prove quite inadequate under another. At times a loosely associated crowd, acting in the main from fitful impulse, has performed the functions, and therefore has deserved the name, of party ; but in the more advanced states of the modern world this is no longer possible. Without a high degree of organization the largest body of citizens cannot at the present day do the proper work of party. The change which has taken place within a century seems almost startling. In respect to organization there is as little resemblance between the parties of the Federalist period and their compact, highly disciplined successors of to-day, as between the feudal levies of the crusading period and the armies which established the unity of the German empire. To go further back, the parties of classic antiquity impress the reader of history, and still more the modern party manager, as unwieldy and undependable in the extreme. This is true particularly of the ancient democratic parties. The followers — it would hardly do to call them the supporters — of the Gracchi seem more like mobs than parties ; and though Cæsar conquered in the name of democracy, he did so by means of the army which he was able to organize, rather than by the aid of a party, — a fact which goes far to explain and to justify his subsequent course.

Without doubt the increasing susceptibility to the influences that organize is a general characteristic of modern times ; for we see it in all departments of human activity — social, ecclesiastical and industrial, as well as political. The stimulus to production

through the higher forms and greater completeness of organization that has been made possible by this increasing susceptibility, has done more than any other one thing to bring about the recent immeasurable enlargement of the wealth of the world. But with the good evil is mingled; and nowhere is this more evident than in politics. The increasing readiness with which men submit themselves to organization accounts in large measure for the rapid growth of party despotism, and, to a greater extent than is commonly supposed, is the source of that deplorable change which is transferring the control of parties from leaders, who embody their ideas, to managers or "bosses," with whom rests, in an ever greater degree, the issue of their struggles.¹ Of the many problems associated with party few are so difficult to solve, and at the same time in such urgent need of solution, as this: How, in the face of the necessity for organization, and in view of the increasing readiness with which men make the sacrifices that organization involves, can the strongest and finest elements that belong to the character of the individual be maintained? Warfare upon "bosses," however useful this may be, cannot cure the evil. So long as the conditions that produce "bosses" remain unchanged, to remove one is simply to make room for another. The true remedy is a change in the attitude of the citizen towards party.

The tasks which parties undertake require for their accomplishment not only a high degree of organization but also an

¹ Of course the control of a party naturally gravitates into the hands of those who are best able to promote its real or apparent success. It is because organization has come to be so very important a factor in the attainment of what is accepted as success, that the man who can organize has risen to the high position in party management which he now holds. On the other hand, it is undeniable that a change for the worse has taken place in the national electorate of the United States. This change is due not only to the too rapid extension of the franchise, but also to a specific change in the character of citizenship. Individuality is decreasing; the average citizen of to-day relies less on his own judgment, and accepts in a more docile way the opinions of those with whom he is associated, than the average citizen of two generations, or even one generation ago. The extension of organization to different fields, and its rapid development in each of these, is, so to speak, making men more organizable—that is, less disposed to assert themselves as individuals, and more disposed to do as others do.

extended period of time. To propagate party doctrines; to secure through elections, or by revolution, the requisite control of the public powers; to incorporate, after such control is secured, by acts of legislation and administrative measures, its own principles with those which underlie the general policy of the state; and lastly, to stand guard against all enemies until the utility of its work is fully proved, and the work itself is definitely accepted,—these are the difficult, laborious, and time-consuming tasks which every successful party must discharge. Hence, whenever a group of citizens has a genuine call to form a party, the members know that they must submit to a degree of organization not far inferior to that of an army, and that the partnership into which they enter is for life.¹

II. *Principles and Policy.*

There are few terms applied to parties which are used so freely as these, and none concerning whose meaning there is such general disagreement. Quite often a measure of policy which a party has supported for a long time is mistaken for a principle. Even Webster speaks of protection and free trade as “party principles.” But principles are always distinguishable from measures of policy; the latter may embody and reveal, but cannot themselves be principles.

In the study of parties the first step should be to ascertain their principles; for until this is done it is impossible to understand or rightly to judge their conduct. The principles of a party I venture to define as *the durable convictions held in common by its members as to what the state should be and do*. For, in the last analysis, it is its convictions in respect to the most desirable form, institutions, spirit and course of action of the state, that determine the natural attitude of a party towards every public question. If we attempt to go further back and

¹ The establishment of party government has done much to perfect both the science and the art of party organization; and it has done this by increasing the rewards, both moral and economic, of success. An admirable account of the organization of American parties is given by Mr. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, chapter 59.

inquire whence these convictions come, we enter a region of speculation which is indeed attractive, but where guesses and surmisings take the place of exact and verifiable conclusions. A man's convictions are themselves definite and tangible; but who can point out with certainty their deeply hidden and inextricably mingled sources? For among these are the countless incalculable factors that constitute heredity, the bewildering complex of subtle but always powerful influences that we call environment, and lastly those elements of personal character that we cannot trace to heredity or environment, but which sometimes have a greater part than all things else in shaping a man's convictions. What in this respect is true of one citizen, is quite as true of the entire group to which we give the name of party.

The policy of a party, on the other hand, comprehends all that the party does in order to establish its principles; it includes therefore the whole of the party's conduct. Principles are disclosed in the end which is sought; policy in the means employed for the attainment of this end. The failure to distinguish between principles and policy accounts for much of the misapprehension and injustice that parties suffer. Not infrequently they are accused of betraying principles when they have simply made a change in policy. This was the case with the Federalist Party. Its principles — that is, the convictions of its most influential members in regard to what the state should be and do — were aristocratic. To the minds of its supporters, at least of those who directed the course of the party, the ideal state was an *aristocratic* republic. To realize in the New World such a state, was, in so far as the Federalists acted from strictly party motives, the end for which they strove. Everything they did or tried to do which they thought conducive to this end, was, properly speaking, a measure of policy. Such were the establishment of the constitution and the inauguration of a stronger general government; for by these means they thought to check the democratization of politics and society. And the same may be truly said of nearly all the celebrated measures of the Federalists; the end they had in view was the creation here

under republican forms of a social and political structure which should resemble as closely as possible that of England.¹ Hence it is not just to accuse the Federalists of treachery to principles because, after their defeat in 1800, many of them ceased to support, and some actually turned against, the government which they had done most to create and make prosperous. The change in their conduct proceeded not from treachery but from fidelity to principles. It was because their principles were still aristocratic that they would not, and indeed could not, help to guard and strengthen the fortress they had built as a protection against democracy, but which had fallen into the hands of their enemies.

Another accusation of treachery to principles, which is now almost universally accepted as just, is that based on the course of the Democratic-Republican Party from its accession to power in 1801 until the beginning of its disintegration in Monroe's second administration. In the purchase of Louisiana; in the support of an embargo which "destroyed instead of protecting" commerce; in the disregard during the war of 1812 of rights on which, under the guidance of the foremost leaders of the national democracy, the democratic states of Virginia and Kentucky had laid great stress in the Resolutions of 1798 and 1799; in the creation of the second Bank of the United States; in the passage of distinctly protective tariff acts; and in the favor shown to internal improvements:—in all these and other instances it is noted that the party interpreted the constitution in a way against which it had previously made earnest protest, and supported measures which hitherto it had condemned habitually and in the strongest terms. But did these acts proceed from treachery to democratic principles? If they prove that the party had lost its earlier convictions as to what the state should be and do, and had come under the influence of new and differ-

¹ It may be objected that the Federalists individually and as a body acted often from motives of the purest patriotism. This is conceded, but my contention is that in every such case they acted not as partisans, not as Federalists, but as Americans, and that in many of these cases Democrats could and did unite with them. But of this more below.

ent convictions, we must answer : Yes. If, on the other hand, the party was still true to the Jeffersonian ideal of the state — an ideal which was then as it now is the best embodiment of democratic principles, and in support of which the victory of the year 1800 had been won, we must answer : No. The view which seems to me most reasonable is, that the adoption of these and like measures signifies a change in policy rather than in principles. Most of them were promoted or at least approved by Jefferson himself ; and no one accuses him of betraying democratic principles. The situation was this : unless the party could meet successfully the new and, owing to the Napoleonic wars, peculiarly trying responsibilities of office, it would lose the favor of the people, and therewith all hope of soon establishing its principles as the principles of the nation. It was, therefore, not through forgetfulness of these, but in order to save them, that it resorted to the measures we have named. Only when a party deliberately and consciously adopts a policy which tends to prevent their realization can it be accused justly of betraying its principles.

Parties often misjudge not only in regard to individual measures, but as to whole lines of policy ; indeed, party history is filled to overflowing with errors of this kind, while it records few if any unmistakable cases of treachery to principles.

It is sometimes claimed that the principles of a party cannot change — that the identity of a party is maintained only through the continued support of unchanging principles. While there is considerable truth in this view, the statement should be qualified. The convictions which are rooted in character — and only such deserve to rank as party principles — cannot change easily or rapidly ; still, in all progressive countries the character of the people as a whole and of each division of the people is always in process of change. The conservatives grow more liberal ; the liberals, more conservative ; and all more tolerant and open-minded. The movement is slow, but its influence upon the convictions which men hold in regard to what the state should be and do is very considerable. The American conservative in the days of the Whigs differed not

a little in principle from his political ancestor, the Federalist conservative; and the Republican conservative of to-day differs quite as much from the Whig conservative, whose general principles he has inherited. But while party principles do and should undergo change, the alterations cannot go so far as to destroy or obscure the type: a party with aristocratic principles may find its ideal of the aristocratic state differing widely from that which it held a generation earlier; but so long as the ideal itself remains aristocratic, its principles have not suffered essential change.

On the other hand, many, if not most, features of party policy may undergo total change. Protection until a half-century ago was the policy of the English Conservatives; since then they have supported free trade. There are, however, certain lines of policy so well adapted to aid, under all conditions, in the establishment of particular principles, that we may regard them as permanent. Of these public education is one of the best examples; for its influence must always promote the realization of democratic principles.

When a party is first formed, the bond which unites all its members is that of common principles. As parties grow, this bond is gradually, though never completely, exchanged for that of a common policy. In modern states no party can become a great party save by winning recruits from those who never accept its principles. The Democratic Party of the United States owed a considerable portion of its strength before the Civil War to its success in uniting, in support of a pro-slavery policy, the masses of the North, whose principles were democratic, with the ruling class of the South, whose principles were aristocratic.

III. *The End of Party.*

In his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, published in 1770, just a century and a quarter ago, when the material by which to test the theory was less abundant and in some respects far inferior to what we now possess, Edmund

Burke defined party as "a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." In Burke's opinion, therefore, all parties have one and the same end, namely, to promote the "national interest"; they differ from one another only because each has its own way or method for promoting this interest.¹ This view presents parties as seeking not their own, but a higher and larger good, namely, that of the state; they come before us as zealous, high-minded servants, each working in his own way for the interest of a noble master. The picture is attractive, and our first feeling is that we would like to have it true. But is it true? Certainly there is much in party professions that may be urged in its support. Every party which thinks it has a fair prospect of winning office confines itself as closely as possible to the establishment of a single proposition, namely, that while other parties are bent on courses that tend to destroy the state, its own efforts are directed to the single end of promoting the general welfare. This is the substance of official platforms, of the letters of acceptance by party nominees, and of the effusions of the partisan stump and journal. In every one of these utterances the keynote is devotion to what Burke calls the "national interest."

If, in determining what is the end of party, it were proper to accept as true what each party claims for itself, the view of Burke would be established impregably; but this we cannot do — and for reasons which are conclusive. In the first place, parties put forth their self-laudations when the immediate purpose for which they strive can be attained only through gaining the good-will of the general public. At such times they are in the position of courtiers, and subject to precisely the temptations to which courtiers succumb. In the second place, each, while appropriating to itself the exclusive championship of the

¹ I think the context makes it clear that when, in the quotation cited, Burke speaks of "a *principle* in which they are all agreed," he means a method or course of action. It is evident that this part of the definition summarily describes not the end itself, but the way of its attainment.

cause of the people, describes its rivals one and all in terms which would fitly apply to public enemies ; but there is no reason why in such cases self-praise should be any more trustworthy than accusations. In short, what parties say of themselves, as well as what they say of one another, is so biased by self-interest as to deserve little if any weight.

If at first sight the assent of intelligent and conscientious citizens to these confessedly interested utterances would seem to give them claim to consideration, even this is nevertheless forbidden by the reflection that such citizens are divided into groups each of which denies what the others accept.

It must, however, be conceded that the authorship of the definition we are considering, and its wide, not to say general, acceptance, raise a strong presumption in its favor ; but profound and wise as he was, Burke undoubtedly erred in some of his conclusions. What assurance have we that he is right in his view of party ? If true, the definition must hold of every party, both present and past. Let us apply the test. Do our American parties of to-day conform to Burke's ideal ? Is it the national interest that the Democratic, the Republican and the Populist parties are seeking to promote ? Or is it some other interest or set of interests, large and important indeed, but not so large or so important as the interest of the nation ? Is zeal for the good of the whole people, or for that of a limited division of the people, their master motive ? There can be but one answer. Each is the representative, the special champion, of a particular group of citizens for whose ideas and interests it seeks the recognition and fostering care of the state ; to secure this recognition and fostering care is the end for which it came into existence and towards which all of its rational conduct tends. Moreover, what we find true of parties in the United States is also true of those of England, Italy, France and Germany. In none of these countries is it the comprehensive interest of the state as a whole for which any party stands, but the interest of one, or at most a few, of the elements that constitute the state ; and this applies to the parties

that call themselves national as fully as to the others. How relatively small this interest sometimes appears as compared with the national interest, is best seen in the many-membered party system of Germany.¹

But the party of Burke no more resembles the party of the past than it does the party of to-day. For some centuries the plebeians and patricians of Rome constituted two distinct parties, and their struggles decided to a great degree the fortunes of the Roman state. And during the whole of this long period it was never for the sake of Rome, to make her great and prosperous, that they intrigued and fought; on the contrary, it was a narrower good, namely, the interest of a class, which furnished the party motive. But if this was true of the earlier and better days, what shall we say of the later period of the republic, when, after the old patriciate had been replaced by a plutocratic oligarchy and the masses had sunk into a shameless proletariat caring only to be fed and amused at the public expense, the party struggle assumed a more savage form and at last degenerated into a series of frightful civil wars? No reasonable student of the times of Marius and Sulla will maintain that either of the two great parties which they led sought through the policy of bloodshed and proscription to promote the welfare of the state. If we turn to the civil conflicts of the Reformation, we find in those of France and the Netherlands, as well as in those of Germany and, to a great though lesser extent, in those of Scotland, England and Scandinavia, that the interest of a creed, rather than the national interest, was the end for which always one, and sometimes both, of the parties contended. Equally clear is it that in the French Revolution the Jacobins, in undertaking to destroy the higher and middle classes, were seeking to advance, not the interest of France, but simply the mistakenly supposed interest of the lower classes. In no other way can we satisfactorily account for the changed attitude of the Federalist Party of the United States toward the national idea after their defeat in 1800. They cared more for the aristocratic principle of Federalism

¹ See Walcker, *Kritik der deutschen Parteien*, pp. 1-142.

than for the nation ; otherwise they would have remained true to the nation despite the rejection of their principle.

It is moreover a common observation that when states enter on a period of decline, party struggles grow more violent and become always an important and sometimes a chief factor in hastening the process of destruction. It was so in the states of Greece, in republican (as distinguished from imperial) Rome, and in the Eastern Empire. It is certainly not easy to reconcile this fact with the view that the end of party is to promote the general welfare. When, however, a state is in a really healthful condition, the appearance of a great national emergency is the signal for the abatement of party strife. This happened at the outbreak of our Civil War, when Democrats and Republicans worked together to save the Union, each party laying aside to a considerable extent and for the time being the policy for which it had labored previously. This is illustrated in the organization, without prohibiting slavery, of the territories of Colorado, Dakota and Nevada in 1861, when the Republicans had control of both houses of Congress. The sinking of the partisan — I do not use this word as a term of disparagement — in the patriot was nobly exemplified by President Lincoln. His letter to Horace Greeley under date of August 22, 1862, tells what was true of him in this respect from the first day to the last of his term of office :

My paramount object is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it — if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it — and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union ; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

Other notable instances are to be found in the coöperation of Whigs and Democrats in the compromise Tariff Act of 1832, in the more general compromise measures of 1850, and in the patriotic course of the Democrats in the crisis that followed the disputed election of 1876. But it is precisely at

such junctures as these, during which parties do work together to promote the national interest, that they are least like parties. Indeed, at such times strictly party ends are held in abeyance, and parties lose temporarily their most distinctive traits. As soon, however, as the crisis has passed they resume their natural character, and devote themselves to the ends for the sake of which they came into being. On the other hand, the readiness to sacrifice the national interest to that of the limited group which a given party represents always increases with the growth of party spirit ; that is, when a party is most a party it is most ready to disregard and even to attack the interest of the people as a whole.

To sum up : the true end of party — the end, I would repeat, of which it is itself conscious — is, in ordinary times, to promote not the general interest, but the interest of a class, a section or some one of the many groups of citizens which are to be found in every state in which there is political life, an interest which is always something other — and generally, though not always, something less — than the national interest.

But why should the state be divided into groups with separate and sometimes conflicting interests? Why cannot there be throughout the nation one interest, one mind, one aspiration and one public policy, for whose establishment all shall work together harmoniously? Some dream of this, but not wisely ; for the Creator has so made man that his progress depends on diversity. A society in which all should feel, think and act alike would soon almost cease to feel, think and act. Such a society could not be composed of individuals ; it would itself be the only individual. Instead of a rich, varied, continuous, ever-advancing development, it would be capable of energetic activity only when first created, and this would be followed by an exhaustion and lethargy from which there could be no recovery, because in its members the principle of life and growth would have perished. The health and progress of the state as a whole depends on the health and development of the groups of citizens which are its elements. To promote the health, to aid the development, to secure from the state

for each group that degree of recognition and fostering care which are its need and due, — this is the not ignoble end for which parties exist.

In many ways the relationship of a party to the group of citizens of which it is the political representative, is like that of the state to the people of whom this group forms a part. In a general sense what the state undertakes to do for the people, a party undertakes to do for a group. To promote the national interest, that is, the interest that is common to all, is the immediate end of the state ; to promote the group interest is the immediate end of party. In working toward its proper end the state organizes and protects the people and fosters their development ; the party does precisely the same for the group. Each state in dealing with other peoples secures for its own as much influence, reputation and material gain as it can ; each party in dealing with other parties does the same for the group under its charge. In early times no state recognized the rights of other states; the same is equally true of early parties. After many ages of sanguinary struggle states are rising to the consciousness of a world-unity and the obligations which this unity imposes on each towards all ; the same has happened to parties. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the humanization of man — the noblest of all the fruits of progress — is more evident in the changed and changing inter-relationship of states or in that of parties.

To give in briefest compass the substance of the views above set forth, I would say that, just as a state is the political self-realization of a people, so a party is the political self-realization of a group of citizens within the state.¹

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¹ The limits necessarily assigned to this article have made it impossible to treat with fulness any one of its several topics. Two of the most important, namely, the growth of parties through the substitution of a common policy for common principles, and the relationship of party to the state, have been introduced rather than discussed. Others, such as the analysis of party policy, the relation of party to government and the claims of party upon the citizen, each of which stands in a vital relationship to the theory, are omitted altogether.